
Black Forerunner to Ellen White: William E. Foy

by Tim Poirier

Ellen Harmon, a timid 17-year-old girl, was relating one of her earliest visions to the Advent believers in Portland, Maine. The setting may well have been Beethoven Hall, early in 1845. Suddenly, as the assembly encouraged her with earnest "Amens" and an occasional "Glory to God!" a great tall man leaped to his feet. "That is just what I saw!" he shouted with joy, "Just what I saw!"¹

The tall man was 27-year-old William Ellis Foy, a light-skinned black preacher who was already quite well known to the Adventists in Portland. For some time Foy had been traveling from place to place relating the two visions he had received in Boston three years earlier. When he reached Portland, sometime early in 1844, he was warmly welcomed by "Father" John Pearson and his sons, John Jr. and Charles H., who were leaders of the Advent band.² The experience of William Foy provides an important historical context for understanding Ellen White's early visions.

Recent research demands a revision of the traditional Adventist view of William Foy. In the past, Foy has been linked with Hazen Foss as one whom the Lord called to be a prophet but who refused the gift, giving God no alternative but to turn to the "weakest of the weak," Ellen Harmon.³ But Foy's career is badly distorted by the link to Foss. Unlike Foss, who refused to relate his visions, Foy, in sermons and tracts, shared what he had seen. Delbert Baker, editor of *Message Magazine*, has authored a soon-to-be published book

on Foy that views him as a John-the-Baptist figure who was given a limited assignment that he faithfully completed.⁴

Foy is important because of the significant parallels between his visions and the later ones of Ellen White. Foy's acceptance by early Adventists as a recipient of genuine divine revelations makes it clear that visionary experiences were by no means unheard of among Millerites in Maine when Ellen Harmon announced her first vision.

Foy's little pamphlet entitled, *The Christian Experience of William E. Foy Together With the Two Visions He Received in the Months of Jan. and Feb. 1842*, was published through the help of the Pearsons.⁵ Thus, Adventists in Portland were well acquainted with both William Foy and Ellen Harmon, and many believed the visions of both to be genuine manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

Although records are scant, it appears that Foy was reared in Belgrade, Maine, not far from Augusta. Born about 1818, he was the oldest child of Joseph and Betsey Foy.⁶ In 1835, under the preaching of Silas Curtis, Foy decided to become a Christian. Much of his early experience is reminiscent of that described by Ellen White, as both were deeply concerned about spiritual matters and keenly felt their need of a Saviour.

Nearly three years prior to Ellen Harmon's first vision, William Foy, while meeting with "the people of God in Southark St., Boston," on January 18, 1842, received his first vision. It lasted about two and a half hours. The physical effect of the vision on him was very similar to that experienced by Ellen Harmon a few years later. "My breath left me," he states. A doctor who examined

him "could not find any appearance of life, except around the heart."

Ellen White accepted Foy's visions as genuine, even though at some points Foy interpreted what he saw in the light of his belief in the immortality of the soul. To those who knew the two visionaries best, the similarities between their views were marks of authenticity. Since both had been given views of heaven, similarities in their descriptions would be also be likely. There are, however, marked differences as well.

The First Vision

In his first vision, Foy describes how he was led by one "arrayed in white raiment" along the bank of a river, in the midst of which "was a mount of pure water." He saw the living inhabitants of the earth as a great multitude walking on the water toward the mount, where the righteous were given glorious bodies, "pure and shining garments," and bright crowns. The wicked "cried for mercy, and sank beneath the mount."

Questions and Answers About *The Unknown Prophet*, William Foy

by Delbert Baker

After graduating from Oakwood College, Delbert W. Baker received his M.Div. from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Now the editor of Message Magazine, he is also the author of *The Unknown Prophet*, a biography of William Foy that will be released in the fall of 1987 by the Review and Herald Publishing Association, Hagerstown, Maryland. The questions and answers below are taken from *The Unknown Prophet*.

Was Foy a mulatto?

No. The best records indicate he was a light-skinned Black man, not a mulatto in the academic sense of the term.

Did Foy die in 1845 or "shortly thereafter," as some histories state?

No. He lived to be 75 years old. He died in 1893 in the Ellsworth, Maine, area. His gravestone can be seen there to this day.

Conspicuously absent from Foy's description is any reference to the Second Advent. Ellen White, writing after the Great Disappointment, saw the Advent people walking on a narrow path toward the New Jerusalem with the bright light of the "Midnight Cry" behind them. This reassured her fellow believers that their Millerite experience was not in vain. She reported the events of the time of trouble up to the appearance of Christ in the clouds.⁷

In Foy's vision, the saints were next led to a "boundless plain" that his guide identified as the "plain of Paradise." After being "divided into flocks," with each group headed by a guardian angel, the saints came upon a great gate before which stood a "tall and mighty angel clothed in raiment pure and white; his eyes were like flaming fire, and he wore a crown upon his head."

There follows one of the closest parallels between Foy's and Ellen Harmon's visions. Foy wrote: "The angel raised his right hand, and laid hold upon the gate, and opened it; and as it rolled upon its glittering hinges, he cried with a loud voice, to the heavenly host, " 'You're all welcome!' " The saints passed within the gate and

Did Foy have any interaction with the Black Christians in Boston?

Yes. He lived in the Black section of Boston and had his visions in at least one mixed congregation that included Black and White members. (See section in book on Blacks and the Millerite movement.)

Do we know if Foy has any living descendants?

No. At the time of this writing, no descendants have been traced.

Did Foy reject his commission?

No. He paused for a three-month period, but continued actively after that period, sharing what he had seen as long as there were interest and invitations. He never rejected his commission. His ministry continued to the time of his death.

Was there any difference in the manner in which William Foy and Ellen White had visions?

The physical manifestations were alike in many respects, but not in every particular. They both were obviously under supernatural influence. They both had witnesses and a medical examination when in vision, and it was attested that the effect was out of the realm of natural or self-induced phenomena.

Ellen White's longest vision was approximately four

stood on what appeared to be pure glass.

Ellen White describes the welcoming scene in almost the same words: "Jesus raised His mighty, glorious arm, laid hold of the pearly gate, swung it back on its glittering hinges, and said to us, 'You have washed your robes in My blood, stood stiffly for My truth, enter in.' We all marched in and felt that we had a perfect right in the city."⁸

Several different multitudes were then presented to Foy. "Countless millions of shining ones" came with cards which "shone above the brightness of the sun; and they placed them in our hands; but the names of them, I could not read." He then saw "an innumerable multitude, arrayed in white raiment, with cards upon their breasts," whom his guide identified as those who had passed through death.

One of Ellen White's later visions, which she titled "The Sealing," also mentioned cards, golden cards, which were presented by angels to the angel-guard at the gate of the heavenly city.⁹

Foy later beheld the Earth wrapped in "rolling mountains of flame," and in the fire he saw a countless multitude crying for mercy. His guide explained why they were in such distress: "The

gospel has been preached unto them, and the servants have warned them, but they would not believe; and when the great day of God's wrath comes, there will be no mercy for them."

In Ellen White's vision on "The Sealing," a similar scene serves a more specific purpose: "Then I was shown a company who were howling in agony. On their garments was written in large characters, 'Thou art weighed in the balance, and found wanting.' I asked who this company were. The angel said, 'These are they who have once kept the Sabbath and have given it up.'"¹⁰

At the conclusion of his first vision, Foy was brought back again to the "boundless place" where he saw a tree, "the body of which, was like unto transparent glass, and the limbs were like transparent gold, extending all over this boundless place. On every branch of the tree, were small angels standing." He saw the countless millions of the righteous standing on the sea of glass beneath the tree "arrayed in white raiment, with crowns on their heads, and cards on their breasts." Some he recognized as ones he knew while they were yet living on the Earth. They all were plucking fruit from the tree, fruit which he described as clusters

hours, while Foy's longest was more than 12 hours.

What was Ellen White's exposure to Foy's visions and were there any similarities between their visions?

Ellen White said that she had copies of Foy's visions and had heard him speak on a number of occasions, so she was acquainted with him and his material. They were both prophets, having received messages from God, and some of the scenes they saw were similar. There are certain terms and phrases that Ellen White uses that are similar to those Foy used. Their emphasis and style were different, though there were some similarities in scenes and terms.

How would you describe the relation of William Foy and Ellen White in the providential framework?

Their work had a mutually corroborating effect. In no way competing, they both recognized the genuineness and authenticity of each other's work.

What was Foy's attitude toward the Sabbath?

It is not clear. We do know he never specifically referred to the seventh-day Sabbath in his pamphlet. Some reasoning might suggest some possibilities that he might have kept the Sabbath as did some Freewill Baptists, but it can't be substantiated. However, it should be realized that the

Advent band themselves became fully exposed and receptive to the Sabbath truths only in 1844-1845, through the witness of Rachel Oakes Preston, the tract of T. M. Preble, and the ministry of others.

Like the Reformer Martin Luther, not all of God's messengers have fully proclaimed, or for that matter, kept all of God's truth when they are used by God. The important point is that they lived up to the light and truth that they had (Acts 17:30). The case of William Miller illustrates this also. We are assured that he will be saved in heaven (*Early Writings*, p. 258). As far as history records, he never accepted the Sabbath, sanctuary, or Spirit of Prophecy truths. In fact, he apparently opposed some of them. But again God in His omniscient providence accepts and judges us in our own individual contest and according to our individual circumstances (See Psalm 87:4-6).

What is Foy's message for us today?

Get ready, stay ready, for the judgment hour message is here. Jesus is soon to come, and only those who are prepared will be saved. His message reveals God's compassionate and personal interest in His children, and it shows God's multiracial approach to the spreading of this last-day gospel message. God dealings affirm the equality and usability of men, women, and minorities in His work.

of grapes in pitchers of pure gold. Foy continues: "With a lovely voice, the guide then spoke to me and said, 'Those who eat of the fruit of this tree, return to earth no more.' I raised my hand to partake of the heavenly fruit, that I might no more return to earth; but alas! I immediately found myself again in this lonely vale of tears."

Although Foy's description of the tree of life is quite different from Ellen White's (she saw two

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trunks uniting in one tree and makes no mention of small angels on the branches¹¹), the statement of the angel guide in Foy's vision is repeated nearly verbatim in Ellen White's:

I asked Jesus to let me eat of the fruit. He said, "Not now. Those who eat of the fruit of this land go back to earth no more. But in a little while, if faithful, you shall both eat of the fruit of the tree of life and drink of the water of the fountain." He said, "You must go back to earth again and relate to others what I have revealed to you." Then an angel bore me gently down to this dark world. Sometimes I think I can stay here no longer; all things of earth look so dreary. I feel very lonely here, for I have seen a better land.¹²

Foy felt compelled to relate what he had seen, but "to escape the cross of going and personally declaring it to the world," he decided to print "a very imperfect sketch." This particular printing is no longer extant. Within two weeks, on February 4, 1842, a large congregation gathered at May Street in Boston, for exhortation and prayer. Foy was present and gave his seat to a friend who had been standing through most of the meeting. He then describes the onset of his second vision: "While I was thus standing, I began to reflect on my disobedience; and while thus engaged, suddenly I heard a voice, as it were, in the spirit, speaking unto me. I immediately fell to the floor, and knew nothing about this body, until twelve hours and a half had passed away, as I was afterward informed."

The Second Vision

In this second vision, Foy describes many scenes that have no parallel in Ellen White's visions. There is, however, one striking and significant link: the mention of three steps.

Foy saw a "mighty angel" who stood with his right foot placed before him, as though walking. "His object appeared to be, to reach the earth. But three steps remained for him to take." A great and terrible voice was then heard, saying, "The sixth angel hath not yet done sounding."

The scenes here described by Foy have no parallel in the writings of Ellen White, but the three steps become, in Ellen White's growing understanding, extremely important. "I was shown three steps," she says, "the first, second, and third angels' messages."¹³

Foy, of course, does not interpret the three steps. Indeed, he could not have interpreted them as Ellen White later did, for the Adventist interpretation of the three angels' messages had not been developed in early 1845, when Foy published his visions. This passage itself may well have given rise to the unconfirmed story that Foy had a third or even a fourth vision he could not understand and thus did not relate—a vision of three platforms (steps?) representing the three angels' messages. But Foy did relate his first and second visions, even though he did not understand them as applying to the three angels' messages. Certainly Foy's mention of the "sixth angel" in his second vision implies that the end would not come until those three steps were taken.

Foy goes on in this vision to describe an "innumerable multitude, arrayed in white raiment, standing in a perfect square, having crowns of unfading glory upon their heads." Ellen White describes a similar scene, only she numbers the multitude at 144,000. "Here on the sea of glass the 144,000 stood in a perfect square. Some of them had very bright crowns, others not so bright."¹⁴ Unlike Ellen White's vision, however, Foy describes the saints as being "the size of children 10 years of age."

At the conclusion of his second vision, Foy

was instructed by his guide to "reveal those things which thou has seen; and also warn thy fellow creatures, to flee from the wrath to come." He was promised, "I will go with thee, and support and help thee, to declare these things to the world"—to which he responded, "I will go." "My guide then spread his wings, and brought my spirit gently to the earth, and then soared away; and immediately I found myself in the body."

Once again, Foy felt greatly distressed about having to relate the visions. He mentions the prejudice existing among the people "against those of my color"—the first indication that Foy was black. Finally, after three days of intense soul-searching, he responded to an invitation by the pastor of the Broomfield Street Church, in Boston, to relate his visions in an afternoon meeting. From that time, Foy traveled from place to place, delivering his message "to crowded houses, enjoying continual peace of mind." His pamphlet closed with a statement by the church clerk that "Bro. Wm. E. Foy, is a regular member, of the first Freewill Baptist Church, in Augusta, [Maine] in good standing."

Ellen White, in an interview in 1906, speaks of Foy receiving four visions, but whether her memory of this was clear or whether it simply reflected J. N. Loughborough's account cannot be known.

Ellen White also recalled Foy's first wife. She remembered attending one meeting where Mrs. Foy kept moving about in her seat, ducking behind the heads of curious listeners, so as not to meet the eye of her husband who was speaking. At the end of the meeting, young Ellen overheard the reason for Mrs. Foy's behavior: "I did as you told me to," she said to her husband. "I hid myself. You didn't see me." It seems that Mrs. Foy would become so excited during her husband's lectures that she would repeat "his words right after him." This so disturbed William that he had told her, "You must not get where you can look at me when I am speaking."¹⁵

Mrs. Foy apparently died within the next few years, for, by 1850, William had returned to Massachusetts where he lived with his mother in New Bedford, serving as a Freewill Baptist clergyman. By 1855, however, Foy was back in his

home state, pastoring a Freewill congregation in Chelsea, Maine.¹⁶

Sometime after this, Foy bought some property in a small community called Plantation No. 7, now a part of East Sullivan, about 22 miles east of Ellsworth, Maine. There he lived with his new bride, Parcentia Wedin Rose, whom he married in 1873. Apparently he had a daughter who died at an early age, and a son named Orrin, whose posterity has not yet been traced. In the little Birch Tree Cemetery, near Sullivan, Maine, a headstone indicates that Foy died November 9, 1893, and bears the verse beginning, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."¹⁷

The Significance of Foy

The very fact that other visionaries, male and female, were active at this time, and accepted as genuine by early Adventists in Maine, belies those explanations of Ellen White's visions that suggest they resulted from some ailment or disability unique to her. This does not in itself force the conclusion that her visions were genuine, for indeed she herself rejected the visions of Dorinda Baker, whom many Adventists in Atkinson, Maine, believed was fully as inspired as Ellen White herself. Nevertheless, visionary experiences were already familiar to Millerites in Maine by the time of Ellen White's first vision.

The fact that Foy was, for so many years, classed as a failed prophet by Adventist historians reminds us of how important it is to reexamine the stories told by pioneer Adventists who often wrote without the advantage of documents that might have corrected their memories.

Finally, William Foy provides us with another instance of forgotten black history. In a Seventh-day Adventist church that has become thoroughly multiethnic, the contributions of nonwhites provide inspirational symbols for continued cooperation in making real the heavenly kingdom glimpsed in vision by a young black man and a young white woman—a vision where the saints stand foursquare and perfectly united.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen. G. White, Manuscript 131, 1906, Interview of August 13, 1906.
2. "Father" Pearson, mentioned by Ellen White in her autobiographical accounts (Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1915], pp. 70, 71; ___, *Testimonies for the Church* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948], vol. 1, p. 64), lived at 10 Casco Street in Portland, Maine, about a mile from the Harmon home. He first took a stand against those who claimed to be prostrated by the power of the Spirit of God. His family voiced opposition to Ellen White's experiences prior to her first vision, until they themselves were overpowered by the Spirit (*Testimonies*, vol. 1, pp. 44-48). It was he, who, during her third vision, saw what seemed to be a ball of fire hit Ellen over the heart, and expressed his confidence in her experience (*Life Sketches* [Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1880], p. 71).
3. J. N. Loughborough, *Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1892), pp. 73, 91.
4. Delbert Baker, "I Have Fought A Good Fight! The Life and Times of William Ellis Foy" (unpublished manuscript in process at Review and Herald Pub. Assn.).
5. William Ellis Foy, *The Christian Experience of William E. Foy Together With the Two Visions He Received in the Months of Jan. and Feb. 1842* (Portland, ME: J. and C. H. Pearson, 1845). That this 24-page tract was issued in January is based on the date it was registered for copyright. All of the facts about Foy and quotations from his visions are found in this tract unless otherwise noted.
6. Details of Foy's life not found in his tract were established by Mormon genealogist Alice Soule, working at the request of the Ellen G. White Estate and Delbert Baker. See Alice Soule to Ron Graybill, May 14, 1982; and Alice Soule to Delbert Baker and Ron Graybill, Sept. 1, 1982.
7. Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1882, 1945), pp. 13-20.
8. *Early Writings*, p. 17.
9. *Early Writings*, p. 37.
10. *Early Writings*, p. 37.
11. *Early Writings*, p. 17.
12. *Early Writings*, pp. 19, 20.
13. *Early Writings*, p. 258.
14. *Early Writings*, p. 16.
15. Ellen G. White, Manuscript 131, 1906.
16. See federal census records for 1850 and the Maine State Register for 1855.
17. Most of the information in this paragraph is from Alice Soule's research and federal census records. The grave was located through property records and 19th-century maps in the Library of Congress.